

Only You Can Prevent Office Meltdowns

Wayne Turk



You have a new assignment. You are now the project manager taking over an ongoing project. It seems to be on track. All is peace and harmony—not! It's on track, but it only takes a few days to learn that there is conflict between two team members on the same task, there have been differences of opinion with quality assurance personnel over processes, and your deputy is fighting with the contracting officer. You have to resolve the issues, or you and the project are in deep trouble. What can you do to bring these conflicts (and any others that you haven't found out about yet) to a reasonable resolution? And how can you do it so it's beneficial to everyone involved? All is not lost. There is a way—more than one, in fact.

Your goal has to be to increase the benefits achieved from managing and encouraging beneficial conflict—like task and process conflict—while at the same time managing, resolving, and reducing the negative effects of relationship conflict. You can do it, and you have to. Because if you don't, you are in for a long (or maybe short), bumpy ride with the project.

Before getting into the how of resolving conflicts, we need to look at some definitions and theory. Then we can get into the practical guidance. Don't skip directly to "The Practical Stuff" later on. Humor me and read the definitions and theory first. They will help.

Defining the Terms

What is conflict? My favorite definition is when two or more people perceive that they have incompatible or opposing ideas, interests, needs, or external or internal demands. The *New Grolier Webster Dictionary of the English Language* defines conflict as "sharp disagreement or opposition of interests or ideas." However you express it, it comes down to "what I want doesn't match what you want." When conflict occurs on the project team or between the team and outsiders, it can reduce morale, lower productivity, increase absenteeism, and cause small- or large-scale confrontations that can even lead to seri-

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You're the Judge: *The Verdict* (from page 18)

(a) Bill's best answer, as it follows from the general rule because he is not performing government duties that affect the financial interests of Hover Devine. Under the general rule, he may seek employment with the company.

(b) Not his best answer. It is true that the Procurement Integrity Act (41 U.S.C. 423) bars him from working for a contractor after having performed certain procurement or program functions involving that contractor for a contract that exceeds \$10 million. However, Bill is barred for only one year, not for life, and he left the deputy program manager job 15 months ago. In addition, he is no longer performing government duties affecting that contractor. He may seek employment with them.

(c) Not his best answer. No ethics rule prohibits you from seeking employment outside the government just because you are a government employee and the potential employer does business with your agency. The prohibition simply prevents you from doing government work that could affect your potential employer.

ous and violent crimes. We'll assume that things aren't bad enough to lead to someone's going over the top, but it could be bad enough to knock the project off track.

What is conflict resolution? It is a process of working through opposing views in order to reach a common goal or mutual purpose. That's part of your job as the PM. It's estimated that managers spend at least 25 percent of their time resolving workplace conflicts—with obvious impact on personal and organizational productivity.

Three Types of Conflict

Look at the three conflicts recently uncovered in your new project. Kelly Graves, writing on "Managing Workplace Conflict" on the Project Mechanics Web site, describes three types of conflict—task, process, and relationship—that seem to fit your situation. The conflict between two team members may be a **task conflict**. According to Graves, task conflict arises among members of teams and affects the goals and tasks they are striving to achieve. It can be based on differences in vision, intention, or quality expectations. Personal relationships may survive task conflict, but a project may not. It is essential to channel any task conflicts so that the differences become collaborative and lead to improvements in the way the team thinks about and goes about accomplishing current and

future tasks. As the PM, it is your job to guide any conflict into a direction that will help rather than hurt the project, if at all possible. Not necessarily an easy task, since each conflict is different. Converting conflict to friendly competition might be one way, or taking the best from both sides might be another.

Then there is **process conflict**, which centers around the procedures, steps, or methods used to reach a goal. One person might like to plan many steps ahead while another might like to dive in headfirst. These differences in approach or process can lead to communication breakdowns and, ultimately, conflict. But like task conflict, process conflict can be useful if managed correctly. Healthy differences in approaches to process will often lead to improved ways of doing the job. Processes are great, but they can almost always be improved ("The Process Trap," *Defense AT&L*, May – June 2006),

Relationship conflicts occur directly between people and may be over roles, styles, resources, or even personalities. Graves says that relationship conflicts can undermine and tear at the fabric of a team's ability to achieve goals efficiently and effectively. Relationship conflict can penetrate and damage all aspects of an organization. When people don't communicate effectively, teams, projects, or even an entire organization will suffer. Relationship conflict can quickly demand all the attention and energy of the manager, leaving too little time to accomplish necessary tasks, and hurting the project.

Understanding the Theory

According to Julie Gatlin, Allen Wysocki, and Karl Kepne in "Understanding Conflict in the Workplace" (University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agriculture Sciences Web site), there are eight common causes of conflict:

- **Conflicting Needs**—Whenever people compete for scarce resources, recognition, and power, there can be conflict. Since everyone needs a share of the resources (e.g., people, space, supplies, funding, or the boss's time) to do their jobs, it is no surprise when those who feel shorted develop conflicts with those they perceive as getting more than their share.
- **Conflicting Styles**—Individuals have different styles. Everyone should understand his or her own style and learn how to work with others who have different styles. An example of conflicting styles would be one person who thrives in a very structured environment while another works best in an unstructured (possibly even chaotic) environment. Two such people could easily drive each other crazy if they don't learn to accept one another's work style.
- **Conflicting Perceptions**—Just as people can have conflicting styles, they can also have conflicting perceptions. They may view the same incident in dramatically different ways. Memos, performance reviews, rumors, and hallway comments can be sources for conflicting

perceptions that then become each person's reality. It is the PM's job to make sure that everyone gets the same accurate information, even if it is bad news.

- **Conflicting Goals**—Problems can occur when people are responsible for different duties in achieving the same goal. Imagine software developers' dilemmas in a situation where they are given conflicting goals by two superiors. The team lead says that rapid development is the top priority, while the test manager says that accuracy and quality are the top priorities.
- **Conflicting Pressures**—Conflicting pressures can occur when two or more workers or teams are responsible for separate actions with the same deadline. This can be especially true when the same resources are required by each. The extent to which people must depend on each other to complete work can contribute greatly to conflict.
- **Conflicting Roles**—How many times have you worked for a boss who gave the same task to more than one person? Or gave one person two tasks that were mutually exclusive? The first situation can contribute to a power struggle for resources and may cause intentional or unintentional sabotage behavior. The second may create internal conflict which leads to neither task getting done.
- **Different Personal Values**—Conflict can be caused by differing personal values. Political, religious, or ethnicity differences can lead to suspicion and conflict. The PM has to ensure that these differences don't affect team members. And they, in turn, need to learn to accept diversity of all kinds in the workplace.
- **Unpredictable Policies**—Whenever policies are changed, inconsistently applied, or nonexistent, misunderstandings are likely to occur. People have to know and understand rules and policies; they shouldn't have to guess. The absence of clear policies, or policies that are constantly changing, can create an environment of uncertainty and conflict.

The Practical Stuff: Resolution

Now we're getting to the good stuff: resolution. One method of conflict resolution is collaboration or finding a way to satisfy the concerns of all involved. It is appropriate when both the issues and the relationship are significant, cooperation is important, a positive outcome is necessary, new ideas are needed, and/or there is a reasonable hope that all concerns can be addressed. The use of collaboration is inappropriate when time is of the essence, issues are unimportant, goals of the other party are wrong or illegal, and/or enforcement of a precedent is necessary.

Compromise also constitutes a method of resolution. You are seeking the middle ground that partially satisfies all involved. It is said that in a good compromise, everyone goes away both happy and disappointed. Its use is appropriate when cooperation is important, but time/re-

sources are limited, or finding an outcome—even one that is less than the best—is better than being without any solution. It is not the right way to go when a creative solution is essential or there are other constraints, such as time or technical capabilities.

First off, you are the PM. That means that you're the boss and can force a resolution to any conflict within your team. Of course, doing that may come back to bite you later. It may create conflicts between you and your people or cause the loss of team members. There will be times when you have no choice, and it's the only solution. Don't be afraid to use your positional authority if necessary.

As the PM—and assuming that you are not a part of the conflict—you can serve as the facilitator and negotiator. If the conflict is serious, talk to the parties involved. Tell them that you want to meet with them. While an ad hoc meeting will work, it is better to lay down ground rules and to have them do a few things to prepare. 1) Tell them to think about what the disagreement is about and write out a few notes briefly presenting their position. You might even set a time limit. 2) Tell them that you will allow them to deal with only one topic at a time. 3) Have them be specific—no generalities. 4) Lay down the law that what is presented will not be personalities, but facts and justifications. 5) Explain that you don't want people to get defensive or emotional (easy to say, hard to do) and that you will end the meeting immediately if that happens.

Bring the parties into a neutral place (e.g., your office—unless you are involved in the conflict—or a conference room). Listen to both sides. You have to remain in control and unemotional, too. Keep them on track and within the rules that you laid out. Then work with them to find a solution. Sometimes it will be easy, but other times it will turn out to be almost impossible. Try to negotiate as much of a win-win solution as possible. Compromises are certainly acceptable. It may be that you agree with one side or the other. Or you may see a third answer. Try to get the issue resolved, no matter what. And remember, you're the boss and your decision is final.

Try to get people to resolve less serious conflicts on their own. Suggest the same type of rules, but otherwise, stay out of it yourself, if you can. If it is a task or process conflict, say that you are looking for a solution that is an improvement. Get them working together on it. If it's a relationship conflict (i.e., personality, style, role, etc.), getting the parties to talk it out may be all that is required. The result may be that they agree to disagree but to work cooperatively together.

The best idea is to prevent conflicts or nip them in the bud. Good communications skills and practices can prevent many conflicts. If they start, try to get them cleared

up before they impact the project. Below are some rules to help you (and your people) avoid or survive the conflicts. They are based on guidelines presented by Mark Sichel in "Workplace Etiquette: How to Avoid Conflict in the Workplace" on the Sideroad Web site. They are aimed at workers but fit a manager in most cases. (As a bonus, they should work in a marriage or personal relationship, too.) So take them to heart.

- Think before you speak. Whenever you have issues in the workplace, you're better off thinking through your words before you voice complaints, thoughts, or suggestions. And bite your tongue before that provocative remark comes out of your mouth and you find yourself embroiled in a fight.
- Sometimes managers, coworkers, or team members need to express their resentment or unhappiness over some action (or nonaction) of yours. You can't argue with feelings, so just listen. Rather than argue or be defensive, let them vent and get it out of their system. Usually the best response is a neutral "I'm sorry you feel that way." Try to put yourself in their shoes and give them the empathy that you would want if it were you.
- Make sure you protect yourself with thorough documentation of any potentially volatile situation. This rule applies to people on both sides of the power structure. A smart employee, like a smart manager, will document issues that relate to self-preservation and job security. This is sometimes known as a CYA or "who shot John?" file.



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- Create boundaries and set limits in the workplace. Know how much contact you can take and how much will ignite your internal time bomb. Having created appropriate boundaries, make every effort to be cordial and friendly. Being likeable and popular can only make work life easier.
- When someone has a problem, he or she will often create a scenario that invites your overreaction. Don't do it—overreactions can cause all-out wars. Assess any dispute with a coworker or manager. Is it really worth fighting over?
- Learn to change what you can and accept what you cannot. Don't try to change your co-workers, especially those above you in the hierarchy. It's a cardinal rule that people can change themselves, but no one can change another. You can point things out—unemotionally, factually, and tactfully—and hope that the person changes the questionable behavior.
- Take control of potentially volatile work situations and try to manage them. Strategize and evaluate the personalities, and apply good people-management techniques to the cast of characters.

It's Not All Bad News

There's good news and bad news about conflict. No one is a stranger to it. We experience it everywhere and in all aspects of our lives. Note that the Chinese character for "conflict" represents two meanings: opportunity and danger. Conflict can serve as a constructive mechanism for change—for example, when people with divergent viewpoints come to a new understanding of each other's perspectives). Conflict offers opportunity—as when it offers new insights about a person or provides the chance to work with new people. Good conflict can foster group unity and improve a respectful sharing of differences. It can lead to improvements in processes or the way you work.

On the other hand, conflict can cause tense relations with someone holding a different opinion. When people are contentious, they try to compete with each other and win at the other's expense. This sets in place a series of moves and counter moves that escalate the conflict and can destroy a project or team.

Conflict on a project is a smoldering fire waiting to destroy people, relationships, and even the product. Don't let it take hold. Act quickly and decisively to resolve the conflict, using it for improvement when you can. Conflict will happen, but don't let it damage your project or your career.

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